

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

Witness Statement

TESTIMONY OF
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Introduction

Good morning, Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Oceans, and Wildlife, and ladies and gentlemen. I am Dr. Andrew Rosenberg, Deputy Assistant Administrator for Fisheries. I want to thank the Chair of the Subcommittee for inviting our Agency to address you today regarding H. Con. Res. 189, a concurrent resolution expressing the sense of the Congress regarding the wasteful practice known as shark finning. In my brief remarks, I would like to address the NOAA position on shark finning and the impacts of finning on Pacific shark stocks.

We recognize that the Committee places a high priority on managing our nation's fisheries in a sustainable manner so that these valuable resources will be conserved and maintained to provide optimum yields on a continuing basis. During the 104th Congress, this Committee played a leading role during the reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, as amended by the Sustainable Fisheries Act. This important piece of legislation enhanced protection of our nation's fisheries in many ways. Measures of particular concern to the Committee are the Magnuson-Stevens Act requirements to prevent overfishing, to minimize bycatch, and to minimize the mortality of bycatch that cannot be avoided. NOAA has been working closely with the Councils to address these important fishery conservation and management issues.

NOAA Position on Shark Finning

NOAA believes that shark finning is wasteful and that shark finning should be prohibited in all U.S. waters. NOAA has taken a major step in achieving shark conservation by prohibiting shark finning in the Atlantic, Gulf of Mexico, and Caribbean. In the Atlantic, shark fisheries are managed under the Highly Migratory Species (HMS) Fishery Management Plan (FMP), which is administered by the Secretary of Commerce through NOAA.

In the final rule implementing the HMS FMP, NOAA uses the term "shark finning" to mean "remove only the fins and return the remainder of the shark to the sea." Fishermen are allowed to remove the fins at sea, but are required to land fins in proportion to the carcasses landed.

The vast majority of shark finning by U.S. fishing vessels is currently being conducted in the Central and Western Pacific. Unlike the Atlantic, where shark management measures are developed by NOAA under Secretarial authority, the Western Pacific Fishery Management Council (Western Pacific Council) is responsible for developing fishery management measures in the Central and Western Pacific. NOAA has been working closely with the Western Pacific Council to resolve the shark finning issue through the Council process. The Western Pacific Council is considering shark-finning fishery management measures at its current meeting, which is being held this week.

In addition, the United States has been a leading proponent of international shark conservation at the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). The U.S. position during development of the International Plan of Action for the Conservation and Management of Sharks (IPOA) was that FAO should affirmatively address wasteful fishing practices, including shark finning. The IPOA calls for individual nations to develop national plans of action that prohibit wasteful fishing practices, such as shark finning, by requiring full utilization of all sharks harvested. Pursuant to the IPOA, on September 30, 1999, NOAA published a Federal Register Notice of Availability of a National Plan of Action Outline for the conservation and management of sharks.

Impacts of Finning on Pacific Shark Stocks

A large proportion of the sharks harvested in the Central and Western Pacific are blue sharks, which are not considered desirable as food because the high urea content of the flesh causes the meat to spoil rapidly during storage. Fishermen are reluctant to use hold space for sharks that could be used for more valuable species, such as tunas and swordfish. Fishermen in the region do retain and utilize some species for their meat, such as thresher and mako sharks, but these species make up only a small portion of all sharks harvested. Fishermen also claim that there is no market, or a very limited market, for many sharks in the Western Pacific.

NOAA has very limited data on the status of blue shark populations in the Central and Western Pacific, but available information indicates that the blue shark is not currently overfished. The blue shark is a widely distributed oceanic species that has a higher reproductive rate than most other managed shark species; however, blue sharks reproduce at a far lower rate than most non-shark fishery species. NOAA scientists at the Southwest Fishery Science Center are in the process of conducting a blue shark stock assessment that will provide an update on the current status of Pacific blue shark populations. This assessment is expected to be completed by mid-2000.

The economic boom of the 1980s resulted in a dramatic upswing in demand and price for shark fins used in

shark fin soup. As far as we know, shark fins are used exclusively as an ingredient in shark fin soup, which is an Asian delicacy served in restaurants worldwide. In Asia, only the affluent are able to afford shark fin soup, which commands a price as high as \$120 per bowl.

NOAA data show a corresponding increase in shark finning. From 1991 to 1998 there was a 25-fold increase in sharks killed in the Hawaii longline fisheries, and more than 98 percent of those fish were killed only for their fins. NOAA estimates that in 1998 approximately 60,000 sharks were finned in the Hawaii longline fisheries. U.S. Hawaiian longline vessels landed 34 metric tons of shark fins in 1998 with an estimated value of between \$950,000 and \$1,140,000. Foreign-flagged vessels that capture and fin sharks in international waters are prohibited from landing shark fins in Hawaii. Consequently, many of these vessels transship shark fins to U.S. vessels that are allowed to land fins in Hawaii. In 1998 U.S. vessels landed 120 metric tons of shark fins in Hawaii that had been transshipped, with an estimated value between \$2,376,000 and \$2,640,000. These transshipped fins are exported to Asia.

The issue of shark fin transshipments is closely related to shark finning in U.S. fisheries. The prohibition on shark finning in the Atlantic region probably resulted in increased demand for fins harvested in both U.S. and international Pacific waters. This increased demand has likely put additional harvest pressure on shark populations throughout the entire Pacific. NOAA continues to urge the Western Pacific Council to prohibit shark finning in the U.S. EEZ. However, the issue of shark fin transshipment should also be addressed. It should be pointed out that, even with implementation of new U.S. management measures to prohibit shark finning, in all likelihood, foreign-flagged vessels will continue shark finning in international waters. In the absence of strict international measures to prohibit shark finning, the anticipated result of new U.S. prohibitions would be that foreign vessels will develop new shipment routes for shark fins through ports outside Hawaii.

Conclusion

I welcome the support of Congress for the efforts by NOAA and the Western Pacific Council to conserve sharks in the Central and Western Pacific waters of the U.S. by putting in place management measures that will prohibit shark finning. We fully appreciate the strong interest expressed by Congress concerning the issue of shark finning.

That concludes my testimony, Mr. Chairman. I would be happy to respond to questions.

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